

Reanimating Virgil's *Aeneid*

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The 'classic' status of some ancient texts, such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, can make it difficult to appreciate and enjoy them as lively and innovative works of literature. Here Matthew Robinson gives *Omnibus* readers his top tips for how to escape the weight of intervening history and read this extraordinarily rich poem through fresh eyes.

Fossils and stone

Not everyone enjoys the *Aeneid*. The same could of course be said about any work of literature, as personal tastes and interests vary, but in the case of the *Aeneid*, many are beaten before they even start, before personal taste has entered into the equation. The reason for this pre-emptive lack of enthusiasm lies in the off-putting way in which time and tradition has encouraged us to approach the text. So it's not your fault if you are not enjoying the *Aeneid*: the fault lies with two thousand years of history, and with a fifth-century commentator on the *Aeneid* by the name of Maurus Servius Honoratus. Let me explain.

The first problem is that the last two thousand years have cemented the *Aeneid*'s status as a 'classic'. While that is not in itself a bad thing, thinking of the *Aeneid* as an ancient 'classic' can encourage us to approach it as some dusty old fossil, a lifeless relic of former times, a story set in stone. Because Virgil's story of Aeneas has become the 'classic' story of Aeneas for us, it is easy to assume that it was also the 'classic' story of Aeneas for the Romans; easy indeed, to think that it is the *only* story of Aeneas. This would be a mistake.

The second impediment to a proper enjoyment of Virgil's poem is the commentary of Servius, or rather, one oft-repeated phrase from his commentary, in which he claims that Virgil's intention in writing the *Aeneid* was 'to imitate Homer and to praise Augustus through his ancestors'. This is often the very first thing one learns about the *Aeneid*, which is unfortunate, because it happens to be one of the most misleading and pernicious comments in the history of classical scholarship. That is because it encourages a bland, boring, and two-dimensional approach to one of the most fascinating, complex, and multi-dimensional poems of all time.

The *Aeneid* is not some fossilized lump of stone. It is not some pointless imitation of Homer. It is not some toadying and tedious flag-waving exercise in support of the Augustan regime. If we do not appreciate this, we will miss the fact that the *Aeneid* is a bold, destabilizing, and astonishingly sophisticated text, a text that crucially and constantly provokes the reader to ask questions. As we shall see, those questions are interesting and important, however we decide to answer them.

Reshaping the story of Aeneas

The first stage in reanimating the *Aeneid* is to look more closely at Virgil's version of the Aeneas story, particularly in relation to all the other versions of the Aeneas story that he and his contemporaries would have been aware of. It is important to remember that – as with many mythological tales – the story of Aeneas had been told in many different ways by many different people, not just by poets but by historians and artists too. It is striking then to discover that the story as told by Virgil, our 'classic' version, is radically different from any other version that we know of.

There are surprises at almost every stage of Virgil's *Aeneid*: surprise that Aeneas does not mount a co-ordinated defence at the fall of Troy, as he does in other versions; surprise that Aeneas' father Anchises plays such an important role making all the decisions during Aeneas' travels in book 3; surprise then when he is killed off in just two words in the last ten lines of that book.

What follows the death of Anchises might have been an even greater shock to Virgil's audience. No other surviving account of Aeneas' travels bring him to Carthage: in all cases Aeneas sails straight from Sicily to Italy. There is some evidence to suggest that the poet Naevius, writing in the third century B.C., might have brought Aeneas to Carthage in his poem *The War with Carthage* (which does

not survive except for a handful of quotations in much later writers), but this is hotly debated by scholars; and even if Aeneas did meet Dido in Naevius' poem, which is far from certain, it seems unlikely that they had an affair. Indeed, according to other sources, the story of Dido did not involve Aeneas at all: she was the famous founder of Carthage who killed herself to preserve her oath of fidelity to her dead husband rather than marry again.

So it is quite possible that Aeneas' romantic encounter with Dido – which for us is one of the most famous and familiar parts of the story of Aeneas – would have been one of the most shocking and unexpected for Virgil's contemporaries. Dido, the famously devoted – dare one say pious? – queen of Carthage now kills herself not to preserve her vow of chastity, but because she has broken it, and broken it with Aeneas, whom we might never have expected to be there in the first place. Virgil has rebooted the Aeneas franchise and is taking no prisoners. So why did he decide to bring Aeneas to Carthage? Why did he decide to link Dido and Aeneas, and turn the existing story of Dido on its head? Once we see the freshness and not the familiarity of the *Aeneid*, we see a text that provokes us to ask such important questions, questions that make us think about Rome, Carthage, Cleopatra, Augustus, Antony, love, duty, death, and lots more besides.

Shadows of the dead

After a surprising trip to Carthage, Aeneas embarks on a surprise trip to the underworld – once again, we must try to recapture the shock value of this innovation in the story. No author before Virgil brings Aeneas to the land of the dead – so why does Virgil? Servius would have an answer – to imitate Homer, in particular, to imitate book 11 of the *Odyssey*. The *Aeneid* certainly does evoke Odysseus' trip to the land of the dead: both undertake the journey to receive information about the future, Odysseus from the prophet Tiresias, Aeneas from his father Anchises; just as Odysseus's first encounter is with his recently deceased comrade Elpenor, so Aeneas meets first with his recently deceased helmsman Palinurus; just as Odysseus learns from Agamemnon how he was killed by his wife, so Aeneas learns

from Deiphobus how he was killed by his; both Odysseus and Aeneas encounter someone who killed themselves as a result of their actions, and who refuses to speak to them; both authors also present us with a long list of figures in a narrative device known as a 'catalogue'. But to think of this as 'imitation' is to miss one of the most important and most creative aspects of the *Aeneid*: the way in which Virgil's use of Homer adds depth and complexity to his narrative by inviting us to compare – and crucially, to contrast – various characters and their situations.

Meeting Dido's shade

So let us turn now to Aeneas' encounter with the ghost of Dido in the underworld. Dido, as we remember, killed herself when Aeneas left her after a badly mishandled break-up. When he meets her in the underworld, he attempts to speak to her, but she refuses to respond and moves away. Let us not forget that this whole meeting is another radical innovation: it was Virgil's choice to bring Aeneas to the underworld; it was his creative decision to have Aeneas meet Dido there; and he could construct this meeting any way he wants. But he has constructed it in such a way that his Dido casts a surprising shadow – that of the great Greek warrior Ajax, who killed himself when Odysseus beat him in a dispute about the arms of Achilles, and whom Odysseus meets in the underworld, where he attempts to speak to him, but he refuses to respond and moves away.

This comparison invites us to ask ourselves a very interesting question: 'how is Dido like Ajax?' (a question with some very interesting answers). But just as important as the similarities are the differences: in Homer, the meeting between Odysseus and Ajax is potentially a very powerful scene, but the emotional impact of Ajax's silence and departure ('So I spoke, but he answered me not a word, but went his way to Erebus to join the other spirits of the dead'), and of this lost opportunity for reconciliation, is instantly undermined by what Odysseus says next: 'but nevertheless for all his anger he would have spoken to me, or I to him, but I wanted to see some of the other spirits of the dead...'. It turns out that they might have been reconciled after all, but Odysseus just had better things to do. Things are pointedly different for Aeneas, whose last words make clear the finality of the situation: 'This is the very last thing fate allows me to say to you!' When Dido departs, rather than moving on quickly in his curiosity to see other spirits of the dead, Aeneas 'long gazed after her with tears in his eyes and pity in his heart' – in this instance, reconciliation really is impossible, and Aeneas will never be able

to ease his pain and guilt.

Differences come to the fore again when we consider the two 'catalogues' of spirits in Virgil and Homer. In Homer this catalogue consists of a long list of mythical heroines from the past. Virgil decides to keep the idea of a catalogue, but in the place of female figures from Greek mythology who have died, he presents us with male figures from Roman history, waiting to be born. Again, this says a lot both about the perspective both of the two characters (one looking back, one now looking forward) and of the two poems. It also brings us on to the final point, namely Virgil's desire to praise Augustus.

Looking forward into the past

The *Aeneid*'s catalogue of Romans is narrated by Anchises, who is surveying a procession of Aeneas' descendants (and other Romans-to-be), and pointing them out to Aeneas. He gets through the first group quite quickly – these are the descendants who will rule not in Rome (for that has yet to be founded) but in a place called Alba Longa. Then he comes to Romulus, who will be the founder and first king of Rome.

So far, the descendants have appeared in chronological order. But then, next to Romulus, appearing dramatically out of sequence in the midst of the early Roman kings, comes Augustus, who (Anchises tells us) will extend the Roman empire to the ends of the earth. We are also told that Augustus will 'once again establish a golden age in Latium'. For Servius, and indeed, many others, the praise of Augustus is clear – his importance is underlined by the way in which he is promoted out of chronological sequence, and associated with Romulus, the first founder of Rome. It was fairly standard practice in Rome to proclaim anyone who had saved Rome from some disaster or other as 'a second founder', and (so some thought) Augustus had saved Rome from years of civil war and introduced lasting peace. For those who have internalized Servius' view of the *Aeneid*, this is the end of the matter: three cheers for Augustus and we move on.

However, while the interpretation outlined above is certainly a valid reading of the passage, it is not the only one. We must not let Servius allow us to forget that Augustus had only saved Rome from years of civil war by winning that civil war, and not everyone had been on his side. We must also not forget that the Romans had very mixed feeling about their kings – in general the idea of a king was repellent to the Roman political sensibility. They were very proud of the fact that they had ended the rule of kings hundreds of years ago, and that since then they had lived under a system of govern-

ment ('the republic') where, under normal circumstances, power was held by two consuls, who could remain in office for no more than one year at a time. Although after his victory over Antony Augustus claimed to have 'restored the republic', it was clear that he alone was still in charge, and would stay in charge. He was – to all intents and purposes – a king.

Let us return to the phrase quoted above that introduces Augustus to Aeneas, the man who 'will establish a golden age'. The translation of this phrase is actually rather complicated, because the verb Virgil uses – the Latin *condere* – is a rather unusual one, in that it has multiple meanings, some of which are contradictory: it can mean both 'found, establish' and 'cause to disappear, bring to an end' (rather as 'drawing the curtains' can refer to either opening them or closing them). It is no accident that Virgil uses this particular verb here in the middle of his poem, because he uses the same verb right at the very beginning and right at the very end of the *Aeneid*: in the fifth line of the poem it is used of Aeneas 'founding' a city in Italy, and in the third line from the end it describes the very final action of Aeneas, as he (spoiler alert) 'causes to disappear' his sword into the breast of his humbled enemy Turnus as he begs for mercy. So here, in the middle of the poem, has the heroic Augustus 'founded a golden age' of peace? Or has he 'caused to disappear the golden age' of the republic, and returned Rome to the hated rule of kings, the kings in whose company we unexpectedly find him? Now that's an interesting question.

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